

Rodney Wiltshire's Legislative Response to Mayor Lou Rosamilia's 2014 State of the City address. March 6, 2014

Introduction

Greetings

Honorable Mayor Lou Rosamilia,
Deputy Mayor Peter Ryan
President Pro Tempore Ken Zalewski
and members of the Troy City Council...

Beginning

It can be tough and challenging to be in elected office. You know the saying where you can please some of the people all of the time, all of the people some of the time, but you can't please all of the people all of the time. And with that comes the friends, and enemies, not to mention the allies and frenemies.

I have been told that I should tell a joke, however the City's resident funny man Kevin McCashion cautioned me against it. He said, "Cmon Man, you're the President, you're not funny. Leave the Jokes to me." My wife Jolene might concur with him on that one.

A Quote

So with that, I offer you a quote from Oscar Wilde:

"Always forgive your enemies; nothing annoys them so much."

When this council took office, many people questioned how we would be able to function with so many personality changes who govern within. My goodness, we have experienced the transition with the retirement of a notable firebrand full term councilman from District 2, the introduction of several freshman councilors, and a change in the council leadership.

It has been my commitment and style from day one to build bridges and mend ties between all parties and representatives who hold the honor and privilege to represent all the people of the City of Troy.

Working together in a bipartisan way is a change for this City. Sometimes this has been unusual, uncomfortable, or some may say, unnecessary, but it is what I feel is required to do an honest and thorough job in our capacity to balance the system of government that we are a part of.

As such, there has been a change in tone, and temperament, and willingness to cooperate and work together. I say this is for the betterment of the city, and its residents whom we represent.

The next year

This is my first year in this position as Council President, I am honored to be able to work with my fellow councilmembers as we begin to share our vision for what some of the legislative priorities for this year are.

We are thrilled to be working in concert with Mayor Rosamilia as he guides the city through this very exciting and transformative time.

Housing

We have a legacy city, with very historical homes and a stock that is continually threatened by abandonment and demolition by neglect. We have over 400 blighted and abandoned properties in the city that could eventually require demolition by the city at a high cost to the taxpayer. It would be a great opportunity to partner with a qualified organization who will bring new life into these buildings on their own expense and add affordable housing options to the residential tax base to the City.

Land Banking is one option to dispose of property that may be in the city's hands, in a more expeditious manner than we currently use.

Land Banks are becoming more popular throughout the country and we now have an opportunity to apply for and start our own land bank just as Schenectady and Albany have recently done.

In order for our landbank to be successful, it needs to have diverse committee that is a mix of stakeholders, strong community/neighborhood input into how properties are acquired and released

Part of this process will be funded by seed money that NYS is offering to local municipalities which could be used as seed funding to create a revolving fund to purchase properties

Land banks have the potential to be a transformative tool in preventing the erosion of our city's historic legacy and allowing new homeowners and property owners to put a stake in the city.

Real Property Revision

One system that also contributes to the demise of properties and structures within a city is our form of real property taxation. Currently, whenever an improvement to a property's structure is made, the taxes go up. That may be a disincentive to some to maintain or improve their properties and simply allow them to fall into disrepair. An old solution that is becoming new again is called Land Value Taxation. LVT is a very attractive option to investigate for our city center. Improvements to buildings are rewarded with lower taxes

versus the system now where derelict buildings are rewarded with lower taxes. This is a formula that can help restore investment and continued development in our city.

When the City is in possession of property that it has acquired through the foreclosure method, we need to improve the way that we dispose of it. We do this either by through private sale method and the bidding process.

Currently there is a workgroup that is tasked with evaluating bids and private sales. It should include at least 2 sitting councilmembers in order to ensure that the disposition of the property is in the best interest of the taxpayer, and not just a few stakeholders.

For instance, Last year, the City withheld the private sale of a property on River St., in favor of an anticipated institution's purchase and use of the property for their use.

That purchase and development has not come to fruition, the building still stands vacant and continues to deteriorate, and now that institution is in jeopardy of being completely closed.

Residential Density

Quality of Life in the city encompasses many goals. One of which is the density of residents in any particular building or neighborhood. Our Mini-Dorm Ordinance has been tested and pushed to the edges in the quest for quick revenues by landlords and at the expense of the renters who live there and the neighborhood where it stands. This is something that cannot continue to happen. We will be working to strengthen the law and process so that this action is not something that can just continue to slip by.

Historic Preservation

As the Mayor Stated, "Troy is full of history and it is imperative that we preserve and respect that ingrained fact." I absolutely agree with this statement, and without one, it is quite possible that history can be lost with each new piece of development that we are welcoming. This history can be forgotten and fall by the wayside and go unnoticed without appropriate identification and recognition. History is a process, not a final fact.

Historical District zoning for lansingburgh; Historic district guidelines, use of state and federal historic tax credits; and City Historian are just a few of the ways that we will strengthen and preserve our heritage.

As such, we shall strenuously urge him to appoint a City Historian, this is required by the City's Charter, and as such we need to abide by it. There are many talented and competent individuals who possess the skills and intimate knowledge of the city. The one such person that I cannot think of more highly is that of respected and noted author Don Rittner. His deep roots in the city, knowledge, passion, and commitment to Troy's history, has been evidenced by his many books honoring Troy and Rensselaer County's past.

Equipment

When we have municipal equipment that is no longer needed or beyond its useful life, our system of disposition should be modernized to improve the transfer to other ownership.

Governance

Charter Revision: The Charter that we currently govern by has been bolted together throughout time. In the past 8 years, there have been attempts made to undertake its revision. At this time, the Mayor has committed to making changes, and this is something that the council supports as well.

Inconsistencies do not lend themselves well to the full functioning and fairness of a modern government. For instance, there are many positions that are listed in the Charter, but are not funded or filled due to the continued acceptance of the practice year after year. This needs to be addressed and complete alignment between the budget and Charter must occur.

Finances

If it's in the Charter or Code, then the budget must include it and have a line item for it with funding. If it isn't filled for some reason, those funds go back into the general surplus. We must stop accepting exceptions as the norm.

We need certain positions filled, and the lack of those positions can rear their heads. A Public Works commissioner for example is one position that would be an asset in clearing streets during snow storms.

Budget Planning

We budget during the election cycle. There are a few municipalities in the State that have an alternative cycle during non-political times which allow for a more honest and thoughtful approach to conducting the financial planning of the City and coming up with a meaningful budget.

Many times, the budget planning can become compromised during a reelection campaign where the goal of a low tax increase trumps the effective and prudent operation of the City. There is always a cost of doing the city's business for the services that the taxpayers want and are entitled to.

Public Safety Fee for large institutions

A Payment In Lieu Of Taxes or PILOT For the Larger Institutions and apartment complexes may be in order. Though many are tax free, these organizations still may consume our civic

services. Some more than others. A public Service fee should be evaluated and justified by their relative demand. Some institutions and establishments have many more "frequent flyers" in our system and are in continuous demand of our city's services, while others rarely do. It's not always about the relative size of the institution, but the level of service requested and received.

Police Force

Revamped community policing structure:

As we've recently learned, community policing is a philosophy: that police department is seen as an integral part of the community, it is meant to develop a partnership that is truly equal where issues are identified and solutions for the problems are mutually implemented. Community Policing helps everyone by getting rid of a much of the suspicion.

It must be Proactive - must be strong leadership that can take it and run with it and have the community with supporting the police leadership when it happens.

Community Policing is Not just beat cops or a Unit, rather it is Changing whole culture of department.

Police Objective Review Committee or PORC - change the name; I'm not sure how fond COPS are to having something like the name PORC reviewing them.

The name should include the term community or citizens and may employ academia. It may be important to allow the Committee to Police Review Board to have subpoena power, mediation capability, and its own budget to aid in their review process:

Public Safety

The Mayor stated, "The individual rights, freedoms and protections of our residents, police officers and visitors came into question during the early morning hours of Jan. 25th. I believe all people should be treated fairly, equally and with respect."

I also believe that these issues demand our immediate attention and most thorough evaluation toward discovering all of the details concerning this and other incidents of this nature and determining all of the underlying origins and basis for these events to ensure that it doesn't repeat itself. We owe this attention to both the men and women of our public safety department and to the citizens whom they both protect and serve.

Domestic Violence:

We are grateful for the US Department Of Justice's and office on Violence against women providing us with a \$290,000 grant to combat Domestic Violence. Domestic Violence is a bigger problem than most of us fail to do or are willing to recognize. It doesn't always reveal itself in the classic ways, it manifests itself in ways that are far more subtle, similar to bullying, but amongst significant intimate partners.

It happens among the elderly, with children who are living with them. Neglect, and disadvantage are other forms that are not as visible to the everyday person. We welcome the \$290,000 US Department of Justice grant and the continued partnership with

Unity House here in Troy, as we continue to fight and provide a safe asylum for victims of this abuse.

COPS Grants:

We recognize and appreciate the \$375,000 Community Oriented Policing Services grant for the city. We see this as a great benefit to our Police department, it has a direct impact on protecting our students in school, and providing a more ready awareness of crime, and the early steps that are taken including education and crime prevention in the eyes and minds of our leaders of tomorrow.

Comprehensive Plan:

By implementing the Comprehensive Plan that the city so desperately needs, we can evaluate each community individually and ensure that we allocate economic resources to it that are appropriate to the specific needs of each community. We will accomplish this by genuinely involving the stakeholders from each and every community to solicit their opinions and bring their street corners to the discussion. A comprehensive Plan includes all aspects of life, including residential, commercial, recreational, streets, and safety while at the same time having a place for industry and the city's identity.

Economic Development

The Mayor has mentioned many of the completed projects and those that are underway in the city. This list of over a dozen development projects is part of the city's revitalization. There are a few more that are on the horizon, and this is also exciting for the city. We recognize the positive impact that this economic development has had for the city's vibrancy and attractiveness to the people who do now and want to call Troy home.

Up to this point, this development has been accomplished by reaching out to potential suitors and investors by offering incentive packages and such as Payments in Lieu of Tax agreements and other attractive financial incentives to come and do business in Troy.

These incentives have worked, and the low hanging fruit has been picked. But now, I feel that the attitude of investors and developers will change, and Troy will be THE attractive destination to do business in. We anticipate a new wave of entrepreneurs that will see the intrinsic value of doing business in Troy. These business developers will come to us with proposal and offers. We will be more selective with whom we extend our incentives to.

Jobs

Training & Fair Wages:

When it comes to the local economy, everyone is talking about jobs. And Troy is going through a development resurgence.

Project Labor Agreements or PLA's for one, can ensure that local jobs and high quality safety standards are met when public funds such as IDA monies are used in conjunction with the construction of development projects in the City.

These PLA's include a training and apprenticeship program for local workers. There are plenty of working class jobs which go unfilled by local workers because many of these construction jobs go to out of town or even out of state labor. Our local tax dollars that are meant to sustain and provide for our local economic growth should be kept right here.

Citizens Working Groups

The Mayor and I see eye to eye on the importance of Citizen Working Groups. This is something that the City Council has embraced for the past 2 years.

There are many passionate residents and community leaders in the city that find their calling for participation and offering ideas and alternatives as being a member of one of these working groups.

We are happy to continue our efforts toward making Troy a Sustainable City by acting on the Climate Smart Communities initiatives with our Sustainability Task Force.

Citizens Working Groups are not just limited to Environmental, Energy, or Sustainability issues, but can and should be formed for a diversity of issues that the require a collective and collaborative effort by both the government and those who are governed.

Financials

Bond:

Soon, we will be presented with a Bond Resolution to vote on. The Council is responsible to you, the citizen taxpayers, for keeping your best financial interests in mind when we approve or deny requests from the administration.

There is a cost of doing business that requires a delicate balancing between wants and needs. Staying within our financial constraints and providing the services and equipment that the city needs to serve you the citizen, require thoughtful consideration and analysis for both our current state, and future needs.

It is clear and obvious that the city is struggling with our structural and equipment requirement to provide the necessary services that are in demand and will be in more demand as we continue to grow this city in the coming years.

For example, spending \$200,000 to rebuild a motor on a 10 year old vehicle is not a prudent expense that we had to incur.

Taking advantage of Municipal Bonding and the current rates is an attractive financial option to hedge against the current and future demand that we will face and that our aged equipment is not now, and certainly will not be able to meet.

Sustainability

Tonight, we will be voting on the culmination of the Climate Smart Communities action that we passed last year. We will be putting the final step into play as we organize the formation of our Sustainability Task Force.

This group of citizens, employees, and professionals will be an ongoing, and critical part, of the strategies of the Troy City Government moving forward.

We have recognized that our Climate and Environment is changing, and the changes are erratic and dynamic. As a legacy city, we need to find modern ways to become resilient in our effort to survive and even thrive in the years and decades to come.

Our Task force, will be key in ensuring that our City's government, infrastructure, and plans are set in place to adapt to the modern changes that we face, and provide solutions to these challenges.

Part of being an attractive city to both developers and potential residents, is how environmentally sustainable the city is in its everyday practices and amenities. These wants are no longer fringe ideals for hipsters or crunchy people, but demands made more and more by everyday citizens.

We know now that being green isn't just about trees, but about finances too.

The City of Troy needs to take a strong leadership role in the region concerning sustainability issues.

We will continue to find ways to reign in the costs associated with a legacy city that is living in more environmentally challenging times in this modern world.

Adaptation is key. Promoting things such as: municipal electrical vehicle charging stations throughout the city, efficiency improvements to our city vehicle fleets, promoting transportation alternatives and biking, making ongoing improvements to our waste handling, enhanced recycling, municipal composting, and finally this year, the first seed in our Municipal Solar Farm.

Of course the highly anticipated Solar Farm project that the mayor will be putting out to bid shortly will be a shining and visible example of our commitment to reducing our own dependence on fossil fuels for our energy production and reducing the greenhouse gases that the city is responsible for creating.

In addition to cleaning and greening our city, we also and maybe most importantly, lower our cost of operations, and thus lower our tax burden to you the taxpaying citizens and businesses who call Troy home,

Closing

In closing I offer you another quote:

Change has a considerable psychological impact on the human mind. To the fearful it is threatening because it means that things may get worse. To the hopeful it is encouraging

because things may get better. To the confident it is inspiring because the challenge exists to make things better. 📧 📧 📧 📧

King Whitney Jr.

Thank you, and God Bless you!